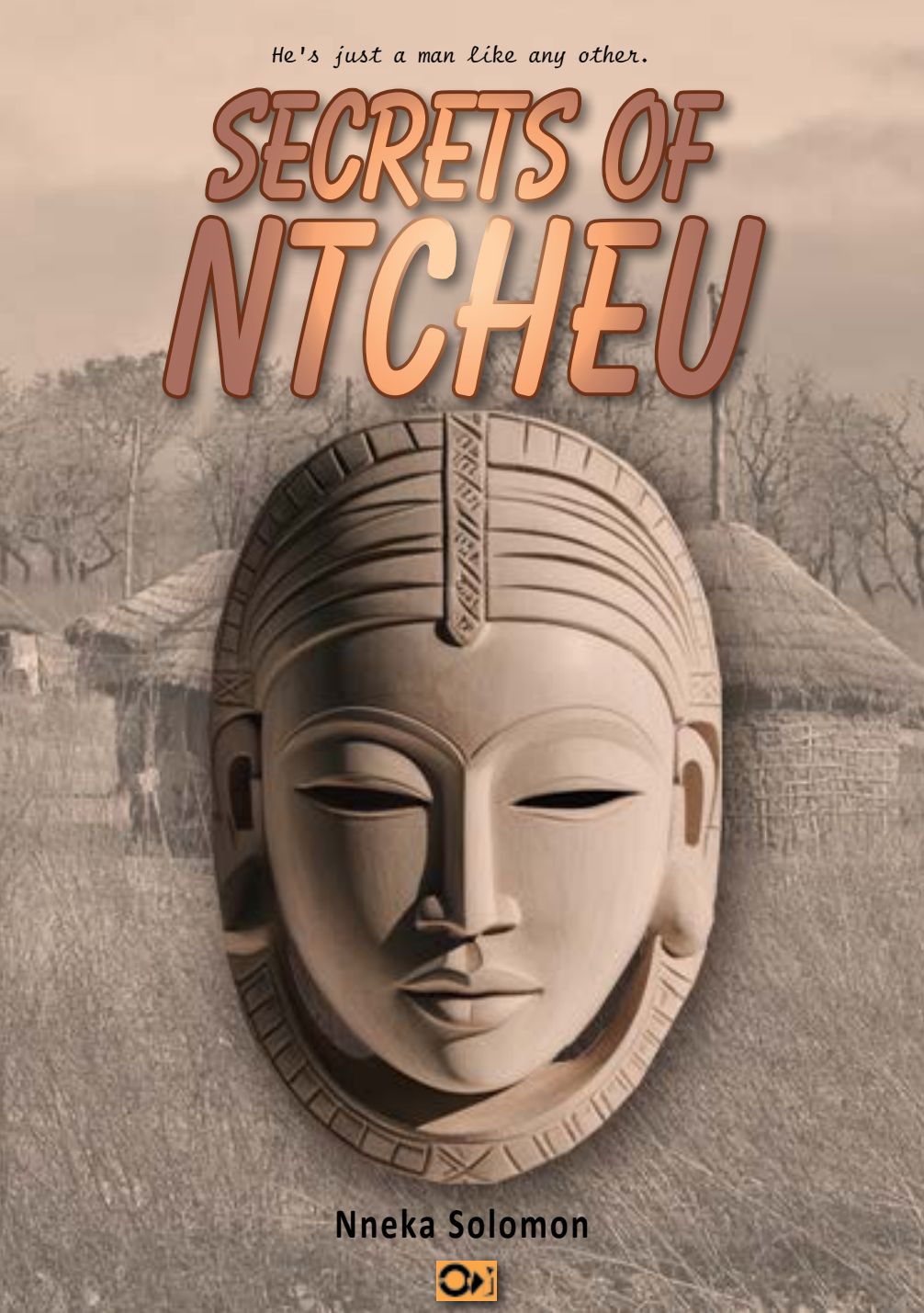
He's just a man like any other.

SECRETS OF NTCHEU



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Nneka Solomon

Secrets of Ntcheu

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The heat was oppressive that afternoon in Ntcheu, a small village where the earth held onto the memory of every step, every whispered word, and every broken promise. The air felt thick with secrets, the dust swirling in lazy circles, catching the last breath of the fading sun. On the path that wound between maize fields, the sounds of chatter drifted from every direction, wives calling to husbands, children running barefoot, and elders gossiping with the gravity of those who had lived a thousand lives.

By the river, under the shade of ancient mango trees that had borne witness to more history than the villagers cared to remember, Thandiwe and Mumbi sat on a weathered log, their feet barely skimming the surface of the cool water. The sounds of the village had become a distant hum in the background, leaving only the rhythmic sound of the river as they spoke.

"I don't like the way he looks at you," Mumbi said, her voice low, tinged with a mix of concern and something else, something sharper. She knew Thandiwe too well, perhaps better than anyone. Mumbi had been there, in the small moments when no one else had been around, when Thandiwe had been unsure of herself, unsure of the village that had both nurtured and judged her. She had seen the light in her friend's eyes dim as the weight of expectations bore down.

Thandiwe tossed a stone into the water, watching as ripples spread outward. "You're too suspicious, Mumbi. He's just a man like any other. He's offering me a life I've always dreamed of."

Mumbi raised an eyebrow. "A life where you don't have me around? Where you turn your back on everything that made you who you are?" Her voice cracked with the force of unsaid things, of memories they both knew too well to deny.

Thandiwe didn't answer at first. She looked at her reflection in the water, her face flickering like a ghost in the currents. The village was small, but it had the kind of eyes that saw everything. Gossip ran through the dirt paths like wild fire; it never took long for news to spread. And today, the news had been Kanyemba.

Kanyemba was rich so rich that it seemed as though wealth followed him, not the other way around. He had arrived in Ntcheu a month ago, and already, people whispered about him in hushed tones, as though his mere presence could summon rain or disaster. Thandiwe's beauty had drawn him like a moth to a flame. But there was something else in the way Kanyemba looked at her—a hunger, an impatience, as though she was the missing piece of some puzzle he needed to complete his life.

"I'm not turning my back on you, Mumbi," Thandiwe said, finally lifting her gaze from the water. "But I have to think about my future. You don't understand. You've always had this freedom, the freedom to live as you choose, to speak your mind. But I ...I don't have that. Not anymore."

Mumbi's laugh was bitter, sharp as a knife. "Freedom, you say? What is freedom when you are bound by chains of your own making?" She paused, looking away toward the village where the men sat, laughing too loudly, making plans for a future that didn't belong to them. "Kanyemba's wealth will only bind you in other ways, Thandiwe. He's not offering you freedom. He's offering you his world and it's a world that won't have room for me."

Thandiwe's eyes flickered with uncertainty. But the weight of Kanyemba's proposal was heavy in her heart. The night before, in the quiet of the small hut where she lived, he had leaned in close, his breath warm against her ear, and whispered, "Marry me, Thandiwe. And I'll give you everything you want, everything you've ever dreamed of."

His words were a soft promise, but to Thandiwe, they felt like a contract she was too afraid to sign, yet too tempted to resist. How long could she live in the shadow of her past, when the future beckoned with open arms and the promise of a life of ease?

"I will not choose between you, Mumbi," Thandiwe said, her voice quivering with the weight of the lie. "I can still be with you, even if I marry him."

Mumbi stood up abruptly, the sudden movement sending a flurry of dust into the air. "I didn't think it would come to this," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "I didn't think I'd ever have to fight for you. But if you want to choose him, Thandiwe, you will have to do so without me."

Thandiwe stood too, her heart racing. "You're being unreasonable. I'm just trying to make the right decision."

"I've seen you make decisions before," Mumbi shot back, her eyes flashing with a fire that mirrored the setting sun. "This isn't about what's right. This is about what's easy. You want him. And you'll leave me for it."

Before Thandiwe could respond, Mumbi turned on her heel and stormed off, leaving her standing in the shadow of the mango trees, her mind a whirl of conflicting thoughts. The words Kanyemba had spoken echoed in her ears: *Break the ties that bind you to the past, Thandiwe. Cut the roots, and I will give you wings.*

But Mumbi was right. There were no roots in Kanyemba's world. There was only the illusion of a life that glittered like gold, fragile and empty.

As Mumbi disappeared into the distance, Thandiwe's chest tightened. She felt the sting of betrayal, but it wasn't just Mumbi who had been hurt. It was the weight of choices she wasn't yet ready to make. The mango trees stood silent around her, as though waiting for a decision that could not be avoided for much longer.

In the distance, the sound of a drum began to beat, slow and steady. The village had gathered for the

evening's festivities, laughter and dancing were already spilling into the warm night air. But as Thandiwe walked away from the river, her heart heavy with uncertainty, the world around her seemed to lose its colour. The rhythm of the drum no longer felt like a celebration—it felt like a countdown to a decision that would change everything.

And all she could do was walk, with the weight of the mango trees pressing down on her, her mind a battleground where love, loyalty, and ambition clashed in silence.

* * * * *

The gossip had started, and in the village of Ntcheu, nothing stayed secret for long.

I.

The sun hung heavy over Ntcheu, its blazing rays casting long, oppressive shadows across the village. The market was a cacophony of voices, the clatter of baskets, and the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze. Women, their clothes bright with the colours of tradition, moved like a vibrant river, each carrying something, cassava roots, bundles of green vegetables, fish wrapped in cloth. Laughter bubbled up, but the underlying hum of gossip was never far behind. You could hear the latest tale of someone's misfortune in the way people traded glances, in the way their voices dropped when the wrong name was mentioned.

Thandiwe had just finished her errands, her small basket laden with tomatoes and sugar, when she noticed Kanyemba standing at the edge of the market. His figure loomed like a dark cloud in the distance.

Tall, his broad shoulders made him seem to tower over the stalls, while his clothes, unfamiliar and foreign in their finery, gleamed with the kind of wealth that made people pause. He was an unusual sight in the village, and his presence commanded attention.

"Thandiwe," Kanyemba's deep voice cut through the murmurs of the crowd like a bell. The world around her seemed to freeze for just a moment. His smile was warm, almost too warm, as though he knew something she didn't. She hesitated, feeling an unfamiliar flutter in her chest, before raising her eyes to meet his.

"I've been looking for you," he said, stepping closer, his voice smooth and inviting.

Thandiwe's heart skipped a beat. She hadn't expected to see him today, not here, not now. She glanced around for Mumbi, who had promised to meet her at the market, but Mumbi was nowhere in sight. A small panic stirred in her, but she forced it down, straightening her back. "I was just finishing my errands," she replied, but her words felt thin, as though they weren't her own.

"I know," Kanyemba said, his eyes never leaving hers. "But I have something important to ask you."

Thandiwe swallowed hard, and for a moment, she couldn't place the tension that tightened around her chest. The market, which had felt so familiar just moments ago, now seemed like a distant echo, the sounds muffled by the heavy weight of his presence. It was as if the whole village had paused to watch them.

"What is it?" Thandiwe asked, her voice wavering slightly.

Kanyemba took a step closer, his stature making her feel smaller despite her height. "I want to marry you."

Her heart skipped, then thudded painfully against her ribs. Marry her? It wasn't that she hadn't known it might happen one day. Everyone had speculated gossiped, in fact that he would eventually make the offer. But hearing it now, so plainly, so directly, it felt unreal. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Thandiwe," he continued, his voice lowering as though they shared a secret, though there was nothing secretive about it. "I can offer you security, comfort, and a life free from worry. A future that will be bright. And I will give you everything you deserve."

He took a breath, as if summoning the courage to say the next words, though Thandiwe could already feel them hanging in the air between them. “But there is one condition.”

Thandiwe blinked, the words pulling her from her reverie. “A condition?”

He nodded slowly, his eyes scanning the bustling market as though checking for eavesdroppers. But there was no one near enough to overhear; it was just the two of them now.

“You must stop seeing Mumbi,” Kanyemba said, his voice so quiet now that it felt almost like a whisper in the heat of the afternoon.

Thandiwe’s blood ran cold. She froze, her hand instinctively clutching the edge of her basket, knuckles whitening. “What do you mean?” she asked, her voice tighter than she intended, though the question already felt foolish on her lips.

“Mumbi,” Kanyemba repeated, his gaze flicking toward the far edge of the market, where the men huddled in their own world. “She is a distraction. A reminder of your humble beginnings. She has nothing to offer you. In time, you will see that her presence will hold you back.”

Thandiwe's mind spun. The air felt thick with the heat of the day, the sounds of the market growing muffled, distant, as though they were no longer part of her world. She struggled to breathe, to make sense of what he was saying.

"Her presence will hold me back?" Thandiwe's voice was unrecognizable, a whisper barely escaping her throat.

Kanyemba nodded, and there was no mistaking the finality in his words. "A wife of mine cannot be friends with someone like her. A woman who lives in the past, who clings to old ties."

Her chest tightened, the weight of his words pressing down on her. How could she make this choice? How could she choose between him, this man who promised her a life beyond what she had ever dreamed, and Mumbi, the one person who had stood by her through every trial, every heartbreak, every moment of doubt?

Mumbi had been there when the world felt too heavy. She had been the one to pick up the pieces when Thandiwe had lost her father, when the village had turned its back on her mother. Mumbi had held her hand through every storm, and now, Kanyemba was asking her to sever that bond.

Thandiwe looked up at Kanyemba, her mind a whirl of confusion and fear. "I can't... I can't just give up on her like that. Mumbi is... she's my friend."

Kanyemba's smile remained, but there was no warmth in it now. It was calculated, knowing. "You don't need her. You need me. Think about what I'm offering you, Thandiwe. A future filled with security. A life without struggle."

The words felt heavy, like a stone lodged in her throat. She could feel the village watching them, the gossip already beginning, the judgment forming in invisible threads around her. The market was no longer a place of vibrancy; it was a stage, and they were the actors in a play with no script.

"You want me to choose," Thandiwe said, more to herself than to him. Her voice felt small. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "You want me to choose you. Over her."

"Over everything," Kanyemba corrected her gently, though the finality in his tone was undeniable. "I'm offering you a life of comfort. She offers you nothing but the past."

Thandiwe opened her mouth to speak, but no

words came out. She felt trapped, caught in the suffocating space between two worlds one of promises and luxury, the other of memories and loyalty. She glanced once more at the market, at the women laughing in the distance, the children chasing each other between the stalls. Everything felt distant, out of reach.

"I need time," Thandiwe said, her voice barely a whisper.

Kanyemba's smile softened. "Take all the time you need. But remember, Thandiwe, this decision will determine the future of your life. Don't let the past hold you back."

He turned and walked away, leaving Thandiwe standing there in the center of the market, her heart a battlefield between love and loyalty, dreams and reality. And as she watched him disappear into the crowd, the weight of the village's watchful eyes pressed down on her, thick and suffocating.

II.

The sun had begun to dip behind the horizon, casting a golden light over the village. The air was thick with the scent of earth and dust, and the distant murmur of village life was carried lazily by the wind. Children's laughter echoed through the streets, mingling with the soft sounds of cattle lowing in the fields. Thandiwe walked slowly toward the river, her thoughts tangled like the vines that clung to the mango trees lining the path.

Her heart was heavy, each step feeling like it carried the weight of a thousand unspoken words. When she finally reached the riverbank, she found Mumbi waiting beneath their tree, her long, dark braids tumbling over her shoulders like the river's winding path.

Mumbi's eyes were already scanning the horizon as if waiting for Thandiwe to appear. Her smile was wide, but it faltered when she saw the shadow that clung to Thandiwe's face. The usual brightness in

Thandiwe's eyes had dimmed, and Mumbi's heart clenched at the sight. Something was wrong.

"Thandiwe," Mumbi greeted, her voice as warm and inviting as always. She rose to her feet, brushing the dust off her skirt. "I thought you were lost in the market today! I swear, sometimes it feels like you're gone for hours."

"I saw Kanyemba," Thandiwe said quietly, her words hanging in the air, cutting through the chatter of the village as if the world around them suddenly grew still.

Mumbi's eyes widened with excitement, and a laugh bubbled up before she caught herself. "That's wonderful! He's so handsome, so...so different. I knew he'd come for you, Thandiwe. You deserve a man like him. You've worked too hard, you've suffered too much." She stepped forward, as though reaching to embrace her, but stopped herself. Something about the way Thandiwe stood rigid and distant, halted her movement.

Thandiwe took a deep breath, her shoulders sagging beneath the weight of what she was about to say. "He wants me to be his wife," she murmured, barely audible.

Mumbi blinked, her hands trembling slightly as she processed the words. For a moment, she didn't speak. Then, "That's... That's a dream come true, Thandiwe. You deserve it. Don't you see? You'll be living a life beyond what we've ever imagined."

But Thandiwe's eyes held none of the joy Mumbi expected. There was only a quiet storm, something darker, something unsettled.

"There's a condition," Thandiwe whispered, her voice barely rising above the rustling leaves of the mango tree.

Mumbi froze. "A condition?"

Thandiwe met her gaze, her heart twisting. "I must stop seeing you."

Mumbi blinked rapidly, as though she had misheard. She took a step back, her smile faltering. "What...what do you mean?"

Thandiwe let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. The weight of the words felt heavier with each passing second. "Kanyemba says that if I marry him, I must sever all ties with my past... and that means..."

Mumbi shook her head, her hands clenched tightly into fists. “Wait, Thandiwe, are you telling me... you have to choose between me and him?”

The words felt like a slap. A harsh truth had been laid bare between them, raw and unforgiving. The evening breeze seemed to carry a chill, as though the air itself had turned cold with the tension.

Thandiwe felt her chest tighten, the pressure in her throat making it hard to breathe. Her heart was pounding now, every beat a loud reminder of the choice she had to make. “I never wanted this,” she said, voice shaking. “But he offers me a life I’ve never known. I’ve spent so many years working in the fields, so many years feeling like I don’t belong anywhere.”

Her voice cracked, and she had to fight to hold back the tears that threatened to spill. She looked down, her hands clutching the edges of her skirt, unable to look Mumbi in the eye. “And I need this, Mumbi. I need to rise above where I come from. I need to feel like I matter. But it’s not just about me, it’s about what everyone else will think. The village... the villagers—they won’t see me as just a girl from the fields anymore. They’ll see me as someone who belongs.”

Mumbi stood frozen, her eyes wide and unblinking, as if Thandiwe's words were too painful to comprehend. "But what about *us*?" Mumbi's voice broke on the words, a raw edge creeping in. "What about our dreams? All those years we spent together, promising we'd build a life side by side, no matter what the village said?"

Thandiwe swallowed hard, her throat tight with the weight of unspoken things. "I don't know, Mumbi," she whispered. "But if you love me, you'll understand. You'll understand why I have to do this." Her voice was barely audible now, as if she were trying to convince herself as much as Mumbi.

The silence between them grew thick, an unbearable weight that neither of them knew how to lift. The sun had dipped lower, the sky a wash of purples and pinks, and the river's murmuring seemed to grow louder in the stillness.

Mumbi finally moved, though it was a hesitant step forward, as if she were walking on broken glass. "I don't understand, Thandiwe," she said, her voice cracking like dry earth beneath a boot. "I don't understand how you could choose him over me. Over *us*. We've been through everything together. How can you just leave that behind for...for *him*?"

Thandiwe flinched, as if struck by a physical blow. "I'm not leaving you," she said quickly, her hands trembling. "I'll never leave you. But I have to do this. I can't stay in the past forever, Mumbi. You... you know how the village sees us. They'll never let us be more than just girls from the fields, from the dirt. But him... he'll take me away from all of that. He'll change everything."

"And what happens to me?" Mumbi's words were sharp, cutting through the air like a blade. "What happens to *us*? What do I become when you walk away? Just another girl left behind?"

Thandiwe opened her mouth to respond, but the words wouldn't come. She wanted to say that Mumbi would never be left behind, that their friendship was stronger than anything, stronger than Kanyemba's wealth, stronger than the promises of a better life. But deep down, she knew the truth. She had already made her choice, whether she wanted to admit it or not. And no matter how much it tore at her, there was no going back.

"I don't know," she whispered again, her voice thick with regret. "I don't know what will happen to you. But I know what I need, Mumbi. I know what I have to do."

Mumbi stepped back, her face a mask of hurt and disbelief. “I never thought I’d hear this from you,” she said, her voice distant now, colder. “I thought you were stronger than this, Thandiwe. I thought you could see through his lies. But I guess I was wrong.” She turned, her back to Thandiwe now, her shoulders trembling with something more than just anger.

“Mumbi, please,” Thandiwe’s voice cracked, but Mumbi was already walking away, each step heavy, her feet sinking into the soil beneath her.

The evening air hung around Thandiwe like a heavy cloak, suffocating her as she stood in the silence that followed. The river flowed beside her, its waters never slowing, never stopping, just like the decisions she had made. She wanted to scream, to run after Mumbi and take back her words. But she stood frozen, rooted to the spot, as the sun dipped lower into the horizon, casting the village in shadow. The mango tree loomed above her, its branches heavy with the weight of secrets just as her heart was now.

The choice had been made, and she had no idea how to live with it.

III.

The moon was a silver coin in the night sky, casting faint light over the village of Ntcheu. The roads, once busy with the clamour of the market and the laughter of children, were now empty, save for the occasional figure making their way home under the cover of darkness. The air was thick with the scent of burning wood from nearby fires, but the village seemed quieter than it had ever been. There was a certain tension in the air, a tightness, as if the earth itself had stopped breathing.

Thandiwe sat alone by the firepit outside her family's small hut, the flickering flames casting dancing shadows on the mud walls. Her hands were clenched in her lap, and her mind was a storm of swirling thoughts. The weight of the decision she had made pressed on her chest like a stone. She could hear Mumbi's words echoing in her mind, sharp and bitter. *You've made your choice, Thandiwe. Don't come back to me when it all falls apart.*

She closed her eyes, willing the thoughts away. She couldn't afford to turn back now. Not after everything.

A low murmur of voices broke her from her reverie. She turned to find Kanyemba, standing in the doorway, his broad shoulders framed by the dim light of the hut. His presence was commanding, yet there was an unease in his eyes that she hadn't noticed before.

"I've come for you," he said simply, his voice deep and steady, like the river after the rain. "It's time."

Thandiwe stood slowly, her heart racing. She had spent the entire day wrestling with the weight of her decision, but now that the moment had come, she couldn't help the rush of nerves that shot through her veins.

"You're sure?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "About everything?"

Kanyemba stepped forward, his boots making a soft thud on the earth. "There's nothing to be sure about. You belong with me now. I've made my promises. Now, you must make yours."

He held out his hand, a gesture that should have been comforting, but to Thandiwe, it felt like an iron

shackle, cold and unyielding. She hesitated for a moment, the image of Mumbi's hurt face flashing in her mind. But she knew, deep down, that there was no turning back.

She placed her hand in his, the weight of it far heavier than she expected.

The village was quiet as they walked through the dirt paths, Kanyemba leading the way with confidence, his strides long and purposeful. Thandiwe kept her head low, her mind racing with a thousand different thoughts, none of them clear.

As they reached the outskirts of the village, the sound of laughter and chatter from the huts faded, replaced by the sounds of the wind rustling through the tall grasses. The air was cooler now, the night settling in like a blanket.

Kanyemba stopped abruptly, his hand still clasping hers. Thandiwe looked up, confused, until she saw the figure standing ahead of them, outlined by the moonlight.

It was Mumbi.

Her heart stopped in her chest. She had not expected to see her here, not tonight. She had imagined the

end of this chapter would be far quieter, far more final.

Mumbi stood there, her arms crossed, her eyes dark and unreadable. "I knew you'd come," she said, her voice calm, but Thandiwe could hear the undercurrent of anger, of betrayal, in the way the words landed between them.

"Mumbi..." Thandiwe started, her voice faltering. "I didn't want this to happen. I never wanted to hurt you."

"You didn't want this?" Mumbi's laugh was sharp, biting, like the crack of thunder before a storm. "You didn't want this? You've made your choice, Thandiwe. You've chosen him. You've chosen *wealth* over friendship. *Him* over *us*. Don't pretend you didn't know what you were doing."

Thandiwe stepped forward, but Kanyemba's grip on her hand tightened. "Leave it, Thandiwe. We don't need to explain ourselves. She's made her choice."

But Mumbi wasn't done. Her voice rose, her words filled with an intensity that made the night air crackle with tension. "You don't get it, do you?" she snapped. "You think that by marrying him, you'll rise above us,

above the village, above the dust. But what will you do when you're sitting in his mansion, Thandiwe? What will you do when you realize that everything you wanted, everything you thought you needed was never worth it? You'll be sitting there alone, just like I'm standing here alone, wondering why you ever left me behind."

The silence that followed was suffocating. The air felt heavy with everything that had been left unsaid. Thandiwe's heart pounded in her chest as she looked at Mumbi, her chest tightening with an emotion she couldn't quite place. It wasn't just guilt, though there was plenty of that. It wasn't just sorrow, though that threatened to overtake her.

It was fear.

Fear that Mumbi was right. Fear that in chasing something better, she had lost everything that truly mattered.

Kanyemba, sensing the shift, stepped forward, his tone cold and final. "Enough. The decision is made."

But Mumbi didn't back down. She stepped closer, her eyes locked on Thandiwe's, her voice dropping to a low, dangerous whisper. "You think he's your es-

cape, Thandiwe. But you can't escape yourself. You can't escape your own choices."

Thandiwe swallowed hard, her throat dry as dust. She opened her mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come. She wanted to tell Mumbi that she was wrong, that everything would be different. But how could she? How could she tell her that the life she had always dreamed of, the life that was just out of reach, was so tempting that it had torn her apart?

She looked at Kanyemba, his eyes cold and unreadable, his jaw set in a hard line. Then back at Mumbi, who stood tall and defiant in the moonlight. She was losing them both, and there was no way to make it right.

"You've made your decision," Mumbi said quietly, turning away. "And I've made mine."

Before Thandiwe could respond, Mumbi was gone, her figure swallowed by the darkness, leaving nothing behind but the echo of her footsteps.

Kanyemba didn't wait for Thandiwe. He pulled her along, his grip firm, unyielding.

The silence was deafening now. The night stretched

out before them like an endless road, but all Thandiwe could hear was the sound of her own heartbeat, and the distant, fading echo of Mumbi's words.

And as the village of Ntcheu disappeared behind her, Thandiwe knew that the weight of her choices would haunt her forever, no matter how far she ran.

END

Secrets of Ntcheu

Nneka Solomon

Ovi eBook Publishing 2025

Ovi magazine
Design: Thanos

An Ovi eBooks Publication

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He's just a man like any other.

SECRETS OF NTCHEU

Nneka Solomon, part-time educator full-time chronicler of small-town life, spends her days navigating the unpredictable waters of academia and her evenings crafting fantastical tales where the local gossip mill becomes a cauldron of magical intrigue and the town square transforms into a bustling marketplace for enchanted wares.

Nneka Solomon